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Taiwan kicks out Gambian ambassador after recognition withdrawn

Gambia withdrew diplomatic recognition of Taiwan on Friday, prompting Taiwan to kick out the country's ambassador today. China claims it had no role in Gambia's decision.



Gambia's national flag is displayed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taipei, Taiwan, November 15, 2013.
(Pichi Chuang/REUTERS)

By Ralph Jennings, Correspondent / November 18, 2013 at 11:58 am EST

Taipei, Taiwan

Gambia cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan last week, raising questions about whether Taipei's old foe Beijing intervened or Taiwan's own aid to the West African country fell short. Taiwan responded today by asking the Gambian ambassador to leave the country.

Taiwan is now left with just 22 countries that recognize it as a sovereign state following Gambia's surprise Friday announcement. Furious Taiwanese efforts over the weekend to get the Gambians to reconsider failed, leaving experts guessing whether China, who has slowly eroded Taiwan's diplomatic power by wooing its allies, played a role despite a five-year diplomatic ceasefire.

“Personally I don’t think there’s evidence to say China is sabotaging diplomatic relations with Taiwan,” says Lai I-chung, vice president of Taiwan Think Tank. “Is it because of Taiwan’s own negligence or mismanagement of Gambia relations or that The Gambia wants more from Taiwan and didn’t get it? This is something everyone is just trying to scratch their head on.”

The loss of the first country to recognize Taiwan for five years weakens Taiwan’s voice in the United Nations, where China uses its 170-plus diplomatic partners to block access. Since the Chinese civil war of the 1940s China has seen Taiwan as part of its territory rather than as an independent country.

Loss of recognition also further embarrasses Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou, whose approval rating is hovering around 20 percent partly for perceived lack of foreign policy achievements.

China's official Xinhua News Agency reports the country had no contact with Gambia ahead of its break with Taiwan. Beijing and Taipei have apparently honored an informal diplomatic ceasefire reached five years ago when Mr. Ma took office after three decades of checkbook diplomacy that had thinned Taiwan’s friends overseas as they switched to the other side.

Breaking ties

A breakdown of that ceasefire could see other countries cut ties in favor of Beijing. New hostilities would in turn threaten trade and investment pacts that the two have signed since they started talking right after Mr. Ma took office.

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Alliances with China bind developing countries closer to the world’s second largest economy, which has emerged as a leading investor in Africa. The nations that recognize Taiwan are mostly poorer countries in Africa, Latin America, and the South Pacific.

China wants to stay on Taiwan’s good side to appeal for eventual political reunification, analysts say. “I can’t see Beijing having any strategic interest in making Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou look diplomatically weak,” says Sean King, senior vice president with the political consulting firm Park Strategies in New York and Taipei.

Gambian President Yahya Jammeh made a “personal decision” to cut ties, Taiwan's Simon Ko, political deputy minister at the foreign ministry, said at a news conference Friday. President Jammeh's notice of the break was politely worded and expressed thanks to Taiwan for its cooperation, he said.

During the 18-year alliance, Taiwan helped the 1.8 million-population nation with

farming, healthcare, and infrastructure as the two sides exchanged regular visits, Mr. Ko said. Gambia would speak for Taiwan in the United Nations, he added.

Gambia may have cut off Taiwan to pressure it for more aid, some analysts believe. China has made no detectable moves toward establishing close ties with Gambia. But China might approach Gambia after enough time passes to make it appear that it didn't push for the break with Taiwan, Mr. Lai says.

“My guess is that there are a few countries that have been pressing Beijing for several years to switch diplomatic recognition,” says Bonnie Glaser, a senior fellow in China studies with the Center for Strategic and International Studies Freeman Chair in Washington. “China has held off, but can't or doesn't want to forever say no.”

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